



Los Angeles County  
Department of Regional Planning

*Planning for the Challenges Ahead*



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Director

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**TO:** Supervisor Gloria Molina, Chair  
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich  
Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas  
Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky  
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**FROM:** Richard J. Bruckner  
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**SUBJECT: CREATION OF A COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY STANDARDS  
DISTRICT FOR THE SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS NORTH AREA**

**BACKGROUND**

The Santa Monica Mountains North Area Plan was adopted by your Board in October 2000. The North Area Plan calls for the adoption of a community standards district in order to implement the Plan's policies.

The Santa Monica Mountains North Area Community Standards District (CSD) was adopted by your Board in October 2001. While this CSD addressed several areas of concern, including development in antiquated subdivisions and zone-specific development standards to regulate certain uses, the CSD was incomplete and did not fully implement the North Area Plan. The CSD has been amended only three times since adoption: to add the Grading and Significant Ridgeline Ordinance in 2005, the Commercial Zoning Ordinance in 2007, and the Fences, Walls and Landscaping Ordinance in 2010.

**PROPOSED PROJECT**

With work on the Draft Santa Monica Mountains Local Coastal Program (LCP) proceeding, it has become apparent that a complete CSD for the adjoining North Area is essential in order to consistently and efficiently regulate land uses and protect environmental resources in these two very similar areas. At the same time, it is prudent to review both the North Area Plan and Draft LCP to determine if there are areas where additional concerns that have developed over time can be addressed. Given that, your Board instructed the Acting Director of Regional Planning to report back with:

- ♦ An overall strategy to strengthen the North Area CSD to ensure the preservation of the region's rural and semi-rural lifestyle, environmental resources, and the public's continuing investment in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area;

- ♦ An analysis of which policies and provisions should be adapted from the Draft Santa Monica Mountains LCP for the North Area CSD;
- ♦ Recommendations for how policies and provisions of the North Area Plan and CSD, and the Draft LCP can be further strengthened with an updated “dark skies” ordinance to protect against light pollution; mandatory rural road standards that prohibit sidewalks, streetlights, curbs and gutters; and a requirement for landform grading techniques to ensure that modified slopes will better fit in with the natural topography;
- ♦ A comprehensive review of the North Area Plan trails map and policies to ensure that hiking and equestrian trails are encouraged and protected to the maximum extent allowed by law; and,
- ♦ A public outreach strategy to ensure that property owners, the environmental community, architects, equestrians and park agency representatives have the opportunity to participate in the amendment/revision process.

In order to determine where and how best to strengthen the North Area Plan (the Plan) and CSD, we must first evaluate the levels of protection these documents provide. The Plan does a very good job through its land use policy map, residential density calculation and 168 policies of promoting protection of the region’s rural and semi-rural lifestyle, environmental resources, and the public’s continuing investment in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. How these three areas of interest are addressed in the North Area Plan and CSD are discussed below.

1. Protection of the region’s rural/semi-rural lifestyle is an integral part of the North Area Plan and CSD. Plan policies and CSD provisions work together to retain the historic rural character of the local communities.
  - Low-density residential areas – The Plan designates over 96 percent of the residential land uses as rural (minimum lot size one acre per dwelling unit).
  - Scattered, low-intensity neighborhood commercial areas – Less than one percent of the Plan area is within a commercial land use category, and the North Area CSD allows a maximum 0.5 floor-area ratio for commercial structures, limiting their intensity.
  - A lack of curbs, gutters, streetlights and sidewalks – Existing policies in the Land Use and Housing Element of the Plan call for these rural road standards, though there are no implementing provisions for these standards in the North Area CSD.
  - A natural environment in close proximity to development – Protection of environmental resources is a guiding principle of the Plan.
  - Passive recreational opportunities such as hiking and horseback riding – The Conservation and Open Space Element of the Plan contains clear policies calling for improved access to public trails and the expansion of opportunities for dispersed recreation, while adhering to the Plan’s resource protection policies.

- The keeping of horses – Allowing the keeping of horses is Plan policy, and horse keeping is allowed on more than 95 percent of the privately-owned property in the North Area.
2. Protection of environmental resources is an extremely important component of the North Area Plan. The Plan contains 45 policies – over one-quarter of all Plan policies – specific to the protection of environmental resources.
- The guiding principle of the Plan is: *“Let the land dictate the type and intensity of use.”* (Page II-10)
  - The Plan’s guiding principle for managing the natural environment is: *“Resource protection has priority over development.”* (Page IV-17)
  - Biological resources – Plan policies emphasize preserving natural open space and natural biological habitats, and replacing those sensitive plants that are disturbed as a result of development.
  - Hillside Management – Significant natural features must be protected, the amount of grading minimized and severely limited in areas over 50 percent slope, and *“fitting the project into its hillside setting rather than altering the hillside to fit the project”* (Policy IV-13) are all existing Plan policies. Hillside management policies also call for protecting ridgelines from development, provisions for which were incorporated into the CSD through the Grading and Significant Ridgeline Ordinance in 2005.
  - Water Quality – The Plan directs that runoff and erosion be reduced through the incorporation of best management practices in new development, that disturbance to natural drainages and clearing of native vegetation be minimized, and that setbacks be required to protect streams from development and livestock. These policies are not implemented in the CSD.
  - Scenic Resources – Plan policies address the protection of a variety of North Area scenic resources, including the visual qualities of several area routes, natural topographic features, native vegetation, tree communities, and night skies. To improve the visual quality of scenic highways and the Ventura Freeway, the placement of new off-site advertising signs and onsite pole signs is prohibited and such existing signs are to be phased out. There are no implementing provisions for these policies in the CSD.
3. Approximately one-fourth of the unincorporated North Area is preserved as public open space. This public open space provides recreational opportunities and scenic amenities to Santa Monica Mountains residents and visitors, and serves the environment by providing habitat to locally-indigenous species and preserving watersheds that retain and clean runoff. Open space resources in the Santa Monica Mountains include large contiguous blocks of preserved land, visitor-serving recreation facilities, and an extensive trail system utilized by hikers, equestrians and bicyclists.

- Open Space – The Plan recognizes that open space can preserve natural resources, manage water resources, and provide a variety of recreational opportunities. Plan policies call for preserving open space corridors between habitat areas, structuring the pattern and character of development so as to be compatible with open space resources, and legal protections for designated open space lands. These policies could be strengthened to provide additional protections to federal and State parklands from adjoining private development.
- Recreation and Trails – Numerous Plan policies address the importance of establishing a variety of recreational opportunities in the Santa Monica Mountains as well as protecting the public's access to these opportunities, within the context of protecting the area's environmental values and natural resources.

Provisions implementing open space, recreation and trails policies are not currently part of the CSD.

## **DISCUSSION OF REPORTING ITEMS**

This section contains a discussion of the items about which your Board instructed Regional Planning to report.

### **♦ An Overall Strategy to Strengthen the North Area CSD**

A CSD implements the policies of its companion community plan or the Countywide General Plan. Because of the forward-thinking policies written into it a decade ago, the North Area Plan provides a nearly-complete framework for implementing those policies through the North Area CSD. Our task at this point is to update and complete the CSD, strengthening its provisions so as to fully and effectively implement the North Area Plan.

To strengthen the North Area CSD, staff will:

- Examine existing North Area Plan and Countywide General Plan policies, and North Area CSD and Title 22 provisions to determine current levels of protection provided.
- Determine which provisions in the existing North Area CSD need to be strengthened and which additional concerns need to be addressed.
- Review the Draft Santa Monica Mountains LCP, other plans, and provisions of other CSDs to identify ways to ensure and increase protections of the North Area's rural and semi-rural lifestyle.
- Discuss environmental resource protection issues with the National Park Service and State agencies such as State Parks and the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, and devise strategies to increase protection of public lands and those private lands held for land conservation purposes.
- Update the North Area Plan Land Use Policy Map to reflect recent acquisitions of property for public recreation and land conservation.

♦ Adapting Draft Santa Monica Mountains LCP Policies and Provisions to the North Area Plan and North Area CSD

The Santa Monica Mountains North Area and Santa Monica Mountains Coastal Zone are much alike in environmental resources, character, and topography. While the North Area tends to be more accessible and does not have as acute a lack of infrastructure as the Coastal Zone, the communities, concerns, and hazards on both sides of the coastal zone boundary are similar. In the Coastal Zone, the requirement to be consistent with the California Coastal Act necessitates a heightened level of resource protection for that area. Even so, many principles from the Draft LCP, including resource protection, public safety and best management practices, are transferrable to the North Area. Many of the Draft LCP's policies came from the North Area Plan, and several provisions from the North Area CSD were also incorporated into the Draft LCP.

The North Area CSD provides detailed development standards for several areas. These areas include:

- Grading.
- Significant Ridgeline protection.
- Local-serving commercial uses.
- Use restrictions, including density and intensity limitations, and entitlement requirements in zone-specific areas.
- Protections against the cumulative impacts of development in antiquated subdivisions.

Though the provisions addressing grading are extensive, the provisions can be strengthened by requiring the use of landform grading techniques to preserve the natural appearance of hillsides.

The North Area CSD provides limited or no development standards for many other areas which are considered important in both the North Area Plan and Draft LCP, and which your Board has identified as areas of concern. These areas include:

- Exterior lighting.
- Signs.
- Hazards planning.
- Vegetation management [brushing].
- Water resources protection.
- Trail and public lands protection.
- Environmental resource protection [clustering, access roads].
- Hillside management.
- Preservation of rural lifestyle.

The Draft LCP, which your Board has signified its intent to approve, contains numerous provisions addressing each of these areas. Many of the Draft LCP's provisions are directly

transferrable to the North Area CSD; others must be strengthened to increase protections (e.g., exterior lighting) or modified to reflect the North Area setting (e.g., environmental resource protection).

♦ Recommendations for Strengthening the North Area Plan and CSD and the Santa Monica Mountains LCP in Specific Areas

Once again, the North Area Plan contains many policies that were considered forward-thinking at the time and which have been incorporated into the Draft LCP. The North Area Plan's policies address preservation of the quality of night skies, use of rural road standards, and protection of scenic resources through utilization of landform grading techniques. However, these policies have never been implemented through the CSD. The Draft LCP provisions could be strengthened to provide further protections in several areas. Staff will address these issues by:

- Evaluating dark skies provisions suggested by the International Dark-Sky Association and those included in other CSDs and jurisdictions' ordinances, and incorporating those which provide for public safety and are consistent with the resource protection policies of the North Area Plan.
- Incorporating rural road standards, from other ordinances such as the Elizabeth Lakes and Lake Hughes CSD, in consultation with the Department of Public Works.
- Conferring with the Department of Public Works to define landform grading techniques that are implementable and can be included in the CSD.

♦ North Area Plan Trails Map and Policies

The Santa Monica Mountains trails system has been a popular destination for hikers and equestrians for decades, and serves as a vital component of the recreational activities available within the National Recreation Area. Ensuring that these trails are encouraged and protected to the maximum extent possible is consistent with the North Area Plan's goal to provide:

*"[a] variety of recreational opportunities...including public trail access to public lands—all in a manner that respects natural resources."* Goal IV-6

A complete and up-to-date trails map for the Santa Monica Mountains North Area is essential, as the Trails map in the Countywide General Plan is not scheduled to be revised in the current General Plan update. To address your Board's concerns about long-term protection of the area's trails system, staff will:

- Conduct a comprehensive review of the North Area Plan trails map and recreation policies to determine current levels of protection.
- Identify trails policies and provisions in the Draft LCP that are applicable to the North Area, particularly those provisions encouraging the establishment of public trails, revising those policies and provisions where necessary for the North Area.

- Incorporate new public easements and public lands into a revised trails map.
- Work with the Department of Parks and Recreation, National Park Service, State Parks, and organizations such as the Santa Monica Mountains Trails Council to verify the accuracy of a new trails map.

♦ Public Outreach Strategy

Residents, property owners, park agency representatives and other stakeholders in the Santa Monica Mountains are keenly interested in what local jurisdictions are doing with respect to land use issues in the area. Public input is essential to the planning process, particularly in areas such as the Santa Monica Mountains where many interests come together. Staff will ensure public participation in the North Area Plan and CSD update process by:

- Conducting listening sessions with individuals, groups, organizations and agencies.
- Forming a public advisory committee.
- Holding community workshops to identify issues and gather input.
- Releasing community review drafts of the updated Plan and CSD.
- Speaking with local groups about the updates.
- Creating a website with current information on documents, the update process, meetings, and ways to become involved.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

The following additional information concerning completion of this project may be useful to your Board:

- ♦ Timeline – The three components of the project (completing the North Area CSD, updating the North Area Plan, and updating the Draft LCP) would take approximately three years to complete.
- ♦ Resources needed – Projected resources that would be utilized for this project are listed below. Costs and items listed under Services and Supplies are estimates and are subject to change.

- Staff

- One Supervising Regional Planner (33 percent time)
- One Senior RPA (75 percent time)
- One RPA II (100 percent time)

- Services & Supplies

- Printing costs (flyers, notices, plan documents) 750.00
  - Mailing costs (workshops, community meeting and public hearing) 2,600.00
  - Facility rental and ISD setup (workshops, community meeting) 400.00
- \$3,750.00

- Consultant Services
  - GIS
  - County Counsel
  - Environmental consultant if project requires a mitigated negative declaration, addendum, or EIR
- ♦ Environmental Review – A California Environmental Quality Act review must be conducted in order to complete the North Area CSD and updating the North Area Plan. The review would determine the appropriate environmental document for the project.

It is difficult to anticipate the specific environmental document that will be required, but it could range from a negative declaration to an environmental impact report (EIR). If the review determined that an EIR is the appropriate document, staff would evaluate whether the impacts expected under the project were anticipated in the Draft EIR utilized for the North Area Plan; if the impacts of this project were anticipated, there would be no need for preparation of a new EIR. There is also the possibility that an addendum to the Draft EIR would be the appropriate document, as was the case with the Grading and Significant Ridgeline Ordinance. In any case, we will not be able to conduct the environmental review and determine the appropriate document until the parameters and particulars of the project have been determined.

## CONCLUSION

Completing the North Area CSD and updating the North Area Plan and Draft Santa Monica Mountains LCP are tasks well within staff's capabilities, but staffing and work program priorities present a concern for timely completion of the project. We are ready to work with your Board to identify the necessary resources to complete this project in a timely manner.

RJB:JS:gmh

c: Chief Executive Officer  
County Counsel  
Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors